ATLANTA, GEORGIA, USA

Jordan Tovin

More Than Frybread

Jordan Tovin is a documentary photojournalist (b. 2004, Atlanta, GA) pursuing a BFA in photojournalism at the Corcoran School of Art and Design in Washington, D.C. His work focuses on everyday experiences that reveal the dynamic and nuanced intersection of history, community, and culture through long-term visual narratives. Tovin publishes these projects with the goal of making them accessible and affordable while also giving them the space and depth they deserve.

All photographs courtesy of © **Jordan Tovin** from *More Than Frybread*
Elder Breakfast, July 26, 2024

Margaret prepares the pancake mix for the all you can eat Elder Breakfast in the Little Earth Gym on July 26, 2024, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of the proceeds from the breakfast will go towards elder programming and better bingo prizes.

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More Than Frybread

In the 19th century, Native Americans created a food called frybread using the meager rations provided by the US government. By creating a more filling dish when food was scarce, they increased their chances of surviving their persecution. While each tribe developed its own unique recipe, over time, all frybread became synonymous with survival and resilience. Over 100 miles from the nearest reservation, centuries of oppression have manifested in the Native communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul, leading to high levels of addiction and violence. As the birthplace of the American Indian Movement (AIM), the city's American Indian Cultural Corridor has been a focal point for Indigenous people working to overcome these forces for decades.

The Cultural Corridor, and more specifically Little Earth of United Tribes, a low-income housing community in the East Phillips neighborhood of south Minneapolis, serves as a microcosm of the obstacles facing Natives across the nation. Meanwhile, Little Earth also serves as an example of how Natives are pushing back. Familiar with overdoses, high crime rates and low graduation rates, its residents have turned to tradition, spirituality and community to not only survive but to live.

It was the government that forced their families off their land and put their ancestors in boarding schools, unapologetically stripping them of their Native identities. Now, decades later, they are striving to restore their cultural heritage and reclaim their past.

Two Spirit Powwow, July 13, 2024

Cyndy Mountain does her daughter Nola's hair before the Grand Entry for the 3rd Annual Two Spirit Powwow on July 13, 2024, at South High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Two Spirit Native Americans are Indigenous members of the LGBTQ+ community who are believed to have both a masculine and feminine spirit.

What initially inspired you to work on this documentary project? And what about the more candid, unscripted aspect of documentarian approaches to image making captivated you to pursue a degree in photojournalism?

JT: I became interested in working on documentary projects during my sophomore year of college. Then, that summer, I was interning for WCCO, a local CBS affiliate station, and my boss gave me permission to pursue a project of my choosing. I began walking around Minneapolis and just trying to have as many conversations with locals as I could. It was after two days of this when I decided to take a break and take the light rail down to Mall of America. It was on that train that I noticed a woman's "Native Pride" ankle tattoo and began asking her about it, to which she responded, "Go to Little Earth, and you'll find everything you need to know." It was that serendipitous moment that piqued my interest. So I began spending time in the neighborhood, asking the local library as well as the community outreach director in the newsroom for any resources to help educate myself on the history of the Minnesota Indigenous Community in general. As I began to learn more, I began to ask more questions, and through that newfound curiosity, I began to make pictures. As the summer progressed, I spent increasingly more time in East Phillips, and I began to see a story forming in the pictures I was making. At the time I was choosing a degree—it was the culmination of curiosity, art, and a chance to meet new people that drew me to photojournalism.

This low-income housing community in South Minneapolis's East Phillips neighborhood reflects the broader challenges faced by Native peoples throughout the country. What are the most prevalent and the most pressing in this specific location?

JT: Truthfully, I'm in no way qualified to answer that question. I'm not Native nor am I a resident of East Phillips—I'm just a photographer who was able to capture what a fraction of life in this community looks like while trying to create a respectful vessel for the many stories people entrusted me with throughout the summer. Having spent a summer with the people of this beautiful and complicated neighborhood, I do know that they face a challenge of misrepresentation that I imagine is echoed in many Native Communities across the country. But yeah, I'm not sure I can speak to what are the most pressing challenges that face the Native community. That concern about misrepresentation was something an elder from the Little Earth community shared with me directly. While I'm not sure she'd want to be named, she and all the other Elders play a vital role in serving, leading, and protecting East Phillips, and it was always interesting to hear about their lived experiences.

What do you believe is the most challenging aspect of your line of work when we think about the power dynamics embedded in photographic technology, in society?

JT: I wouldn't phrase it as "challenge," but rather a condition of photography. From my view, anyone doing documentary work, especially in a historically marginalized and misrepresented community, owes it, not just to the people they photograph but also the people those photographs impact, to splice their pictures with the voices of that community. One of my professors at school, Matt Eich, taught my classmates and I about the exploitative nature that surrounds photography. He gave us the Aunt May "with great power comes great responsibility" talk that honestly holds a lot of truth to it, especially when discussing the power dynamics that exist in the relationship that makes up every picture. Another thing I encountered with this project was how unfortunately, photographs—even the best ones—have limitations. With this project, it became clear to me that the photographs alone weren't able to convey the precontext of the community or the personal anecdotes I was hearing. I knew there needed to be a heavy writing component that incorporated the voices of those I was photographing.

Can you tell us a bit more about the title of the project? How did you come up with it?

JT: The title was something I was experimenting with for a while. I was trying to come up with something that held the weight of the story and the history. Ironic to the title, frybread is super common in the community—frybread pizza, frybread hotdogs, and of course, frybread tacos. Meanwhile, once I learned about the history of frybread, how it is the product of not just oppression and survival, but also Indigenous resilience, I saw the parallel. Of course, this community is still focused

Cedar Field Park, July 19, 2024

Carmen plays on monkey bars at Cedar Field Park while a woman recovers from an overdose on the basketball court on July 19, 2024, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Watermelon Eating Contest, August 6, 2024

Ollie grabs handfuls of his second watermelon while competing in the Little Earth Watermelon Eating Contest at the National Night Out on August 6, 2024, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

on surviving some of the obstacles that face the neighborhood, but it also focused on healing from it all. Like I said, I'm not Indigenous. Many of these obstacles still exist and face the community today, but my goal with the project was to highlight all of the ways they, as a community, are trying to push past them. It was actually a woman named Cyndy Mountain who tossed out the name in a quilt making class. The more it sat with me throughout the summer, it made more and more sense. Rather than say you're a community that is surviving, how do you push past that to heal, to be something more?

Your photographs denote a strong attention to light and composition. How do these formal elements help carry the message of your project? And how do you know when a photograph is assertive enough to include it in the final edit?

JT: I mean, that's very kind, so thank you, first of all. When I'm 'in the field,' I'm focused on making the best images I can by weaving together the moment, composition, and light. My hope is to use all the components of a photograph to push the story forward. Of course, everything changes once you begin to read the pictures together whether that be with tangible prints or with a computer screen. Pictures are often smarter than we are, as a lot of my mentors have taught me, and seeing pictures together may reveal truths within the story that deviate immensely from what you wanted the story to look like. In editing the project, I showed it to friends, colleagues, mentors—not to have too many cooks in the kitchen per se, but just to have a range of perspectives from honest people. Through those conversations, I began to notice which images added to the story and which took away.

What other Indigenous artists have moved or inspired you?

JT: Oh that's a great question. I'd say Frank Buffalo Hyde, Zig Jackson, Tailyr Irvine, Brian Adams, and Keith Braveheart.

Interview by
Willow Simon